

Competition At Sweet Briar:  
The Development of Athletics From 1906-1920

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\* " 'Friendly Rivalry': SB Athletics  
Program 1906-1920 "

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"Doing Sweet Briar's History"  
Mr. Berg  
30 January 1985  
"I pledge..." JRF

From its foundation, Sweet Briar has held that the healthy, happy life is the effective life, and that four years of college work should increase both physical strength and joy. Athletics and sports have, therefore, always been an important factor.

- Emilie Watts McVea, 1925  
President, Sweet Briar College

In her 1901 essay, The Value of Athletics to College Girls, Harriet I. Ballintine of Vassar College determined that since the introduction of athletics at Vassar, the interest among girls in their physical development has been greatly stimulated. Janet Owen, in a 1932 series of articles entitled Sports in Women's Colleges, was convinced that the athletic program at Hollins succeeded in instilling in its students an appreciation of the values and pleasures of regular athletics. Likewise, at Sweet Briar in the early 1900's, a new attitude on women's athletics and competition was forming. In her 1925 speech, My Ideal For Sweet Briar Students, President Emilie Watts McVea stated:

I would have the graduate of Sweet Briar a woman strong in body, sincere in thought, clear in vision; using the larger freedom of today while preserving the courtesy and the charm of the woman of yesterday.

Past editions and issues of the Briar Patch and Sweet Briar Magazine suggest that athletic activity, be it intramural or intercollegiate, has played an important role in student life at Sweet Briar since her gates opened in 1906. A history of sports development at Sweet Briar between 1906-1920 reveals that, along with many other women's colleges and co-educational institutions, the college developed an interclass and intercollegiate athletic

program suitable to its students and faculty. Once stemming from an attitude of friendly rivalry, the motivating spirit behind athletic activity was now based on competition.

On May 21, 1907, the proposed constitution of the Athletic Association was presented to the faculty of Sweet Briar Institute. Its purpose was to be "the promotion of Athletic Sports." A revised constitution, modified in accordance to recommendations submitted by the faculty and now including the formation of an Athletic Committee whose concern was "the inauguration of new sports," was approved on June 3, 1907.<sup>1</sup> The governing body of athletic activity had been established, and sports at Sweet Briar were about to take on a new role.

During the first year of the Association's existence, very little of importance took place, and although in 1907 the campus boasted two tennis courts, two boats, and a basket-ball field, it was not until the Spring of 1909 that "athletics scored the great point for which it had been striving during its whole three years' history." On April 5, 1909, the first Field Day was held. According to the 1910 Briar Patch, this marked the first real recognition of what had been achieved at Sweet Briar in the way of athletics. The chief features of that day included a Basket-Ball game between the College and Sub-Freshman teams, High-Jump, Standing Broad Jump, Hop-Skip-Jump, Running Broad Jump, Hurdles, and Hundred-Yard Dash competitions. To increase enthusiasm, the faculty presented the Association with a silver cup, the Champion of each Field Day's name to be engraved upon it.<sup>2</sup> At this time, participation in Field Day seemed to be a lady-like exercise, but to be named the winner of the cup was honorable nonetheless.

In time for the third annual competition held in April of 1911, the Fifty-

Yard Dash, Baseball Throw, and Basket-Ball Throw had been added, raising the number of events held to ten. According to the Constitution of the Association, no one who was "deficient in academic work or not in good standing with the Student Government Association" was allowed to compete at Field Day. The winner of each event was awarded five points, the second place finisher received three points, and those finishing third received one point. At the end of the day, the school letters "S.B." were awarded to anyone breaking an established record, and the student having the most total points was deemed Champion of the Year, having their name engraved on the Athletic Cup now located in the bookcase of the Daisy William's Gymnasium, Sweet Briar College.<sup>3</sup>

Termed "the greatest athletic event of the year,"<sup>4</sup> Field Day sparked a competitive drive in students never before seen. For the first time, awards for excellence in athletics were given, and preparation for the event was year-round. Field Day marked the point toward which athletics had been striving.<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1900's, when girls "were not suited for the same athletic program as boys,"<sup>6</sup> directors of gymnasia found that basket-ball was "the game they were eagerly seeking" for women. It did not have "the rough element of football," yet was a "quick, spirited game." It cultivated strength and physical endurance, but was "interesting enough to become a part of physical training for women as football and base-ball had for men."<sup>7</sup> In 1910, it was this sport that dominated athletic activity at Sweet Briar.

The college boasted three teams: the Junior-Freshmen Team, the Senior-Sophomore Team, and the Sub-Special Team, which was composed of students enrolled in pre-college courses and later referred to as the Academy. When it

was decided that a series of Basket-Ball games would be played among them, the practice, held steadily throughout the fall, became "even more strenuous" than before. Each team was determined to win the championship, and added "vim and vigor" to their practice, arousing "an increased spirit of friendly rivalry" throughout the school.

When the time arrived for the first game in the series between the Junior-Freshmen Team and the Sub-Special Team ... excitement was at fever heat. In the midst of much cheering for both sides, the whistle was blown ... brought a sudden hush over the whole crowd, and the ball was tossed.<sup>8</sup>

At the announcement of Sub-Special Team defeating the Junior-Freshmen team, "the intense feeling (of excitement) burst into paroxysms of joy, and the champions made a triumphal march from the field of battle." The Fall Basket-Ball Champions had proved to be more than a "friendly rivalry," though not admittedly so. Perhaps without knowing it, athletics at Sweet Briar was gaining a competitive edge.

In 1910, according to the December publication of the Sweet Briar Magazine, the "usual amount of importance" was attached to athletics at Sweet Briar. Students "availed themselves of the excellent opportunities" for riding, boating, and tennis; attention largely centered on basket-ball. At a meeting of the Boating Club during April of that year, plans were made for an aquatic meet, the first event of its kind to be held on the lake. Diving and swimming contests were held, and "those who were sufficiently expert in swimming" were allowed to participate in water polo.<sup>9</sup>

The Association was expanding, and efforts were made to widen the variety of athletic activity offered by the College. Both the Tennis and Boating Clubs claimed over one hundred members, and the first intramural tennis tournament



was held on campus. During the years 1910-1912, more students than ever participated in athletic activities,<sup>10</sup> and in 1913, La-Crosse was first introduced to Sweet Briar. Under the guidance of Zalenda Brown, Athletic Association President from 1914-1916, many learned "the difficult feat of catching an elusive, hard rubber ball in an unsympathetic La-Crosse stick."<sup>11</sup> The competitive spirit at Sweet Briar continued to grow.

At this time, "athletic zeal burned high in the panting breast" of all those associated with athletics.<sup>12</sup> Greatly responsible for such excitement was Miss Cara Gascoigne, who had served as Physical Director since 1912. An "inspiration to our spirit" and "a spur to our lagging,"<sup>13</sup> Gascoigne took on the instruction of Hockey after its official addition to the Athletic Program in 1915. Although the game had been played on campus since 1909, it was Miss Gascoigne's hope that, someday, "the gentle art of knocking a rubber ball down the field without being massacred on the way" would be mastered.<sup>14</sup>

By 1917, Field Hockey, Basket-Ball, Tennis, Riding and La-Crosse were all firmly established as inter-class competitions. The fact that in March of that year, along with Randolph-Macon, Sweet Briar was the only southern college to be invited to the "Women's Athletic Association Conference" held in Madison, Wisconsin, shows that it stood foremost among southern colleges for the physical development of women.<sup>15</sup> According to the Sweet Briar Magazine of March, 1917, the College was represented among the nineteen institutions because two world records for women were held by her students; a feat undoubtedly caused by more than a spirit of "friendly rivalry."

The purpose of the meeting was to "exchange ideas and give mutual help for the stimulation of athletic interests and activities in women's colleges."

Topics discussed included methods of awarding points and cataloguing records, organization of activities, eligibility, stimulation of athletic interest, and the practice administration of athletic interest, which suggest a competitive move toward broadening athletic circles. However, resolutions were passed to discourage intercollegiate athletics, but at the same time supported the keeping of athletic records and the publishing of them.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary institutes including Sweet Briar were walking a fine line in terms of the direction they felt women's athletics should take. The fact that women wanted to compete actively was seemingly recognized and for the most part, approved. However, how much women would be allowed to do so was the key issue. Nevertheless, both the Field Hockey and Basket-Ball teams were competing intercollegiately by 1921.<sup>17</sup>

Sweet Briar's delegate to the conference reported that the College was among very few institutions represented that had a scholastic standard for eligibility. According to the By-Laws of the Athletic Association Constitution, "members of the Association not maintaining an average of at least 70 percent could not hold office or take part in any athletic contest."<sup>18</sup> Sweet Briar was also placed on two of the three permanent committees selected for making the By-Laws of the Women's Athletic Association Constitution, considered a prestigious honor for the school by all involved with the College's Athletic Association.

During the Fall of 1917, Sweet Briar for the first time recognized Field Hockey as a major sport. Under Delia May Gilmore, the sport was organized and a Varsity team established, thus beginning the Varsity vs. Academy Series, coinciding with the already popular Interclass Series. Varsity Basket-Ball was a new addition that year as well, following a schedule much like that of the Field Hockey Team.<sup>19</sup> Athletic teams were now being more explicitly defined,

and a hierarchy was developing. More qualified players were placed on the Varsity team, and one's competitive ability was a factor in that selection.

In 1918, the major change in attitude concerning competitive athletics at Sweet Briar occurred. Nation-wide, women's perspective of their role in organized sports was changing. At Sweet Briar, it was no longer the style to appear "interestingly pale" or "intellectually delicate."

We now realize that we can be interesting without being pale, and can be sufficiently intellectual without risking our health. It is now our duty as well as our pleasure, and should be our pleasure as well as our duty, to keep fit.<sup>20</sup>

In an effort to accomodate the newly formed outlook, the Athletic Association adapted a new constitution in the Winter of 1918, containing specifications for the incorporation of the Point-System into the athletic program of Sweet Briar. It was hoped that the new system would "furnish an impetus for every girl to come out for some sport."<sup>21</sup>

Some students did not take an active interest in athletics because only "star athletes" received recognition for their efforts. The Point System allowed credit to be given for a greater variety of participation in the College sports program, thus enabling students who "conscientiously worked for athletics" a chance to win her "numerals or letters" without lowering the standard by which they could be obtained.<sup>22</sup>

Officers of the Association, Heads and members of the Basket-Ball and Hockey teams, May Day leaders, and first, second, or third place finishers were awarded points according to the System incorporated into the Association constitution. "Class numerals" were given to any girl having 250 points, and an "S.B." monogram presented to those totaling 500 points. For each 100 accumulated over the 500 point mark, a stripe for the sleeve was awarded. Anyone



earning 1,000 points received a sweater bearing the Sweet Briar monogram. Included in the effort to broaden athletic participation horizons in 1918, Hiking was introduced for the first time as an organized sport and both Freshman and Sophomores were required to play either Field Hockey or Basket-Ball.<sup>23</sup> As stated in the 1919 Briar Patch:

Altho Sweet Briar has always stood, and still stands, for sports for sport's sake, it welcomes this new system as a means of recognizing the efforts of everyone who works faithfully in the interest of Athletics.

Competition now played an effective role in Sweet Briar's athletic program. Students improved themselves physically, thus supplementing the academic atmosphere of the College.

Incorporating the Point System into the Association Constitution proved highly successful, and as a result Horse-Back Riding was introduced as an organized sport in 1920. Riders then received points in accordance with the criteria set for Hiking. More importantly however, 1920 marked Sweet Briar's first year of participation in intercollegiate sports.

Competing in such games had caused a great deal of discussion throughout the College. In late 1919, the Association decided that "games outside the gates" would be beneficial provided that "interclass games were not sacrificed." It was then arranged for Sweet Briar to play Westhampton College one game in both Basket-Ball and Hockey. The Hockey game was scheduled for December 6, 1919, but due to "the extreme perversity" of the weather, was cancelled. But in early 1920, in Sweet Briar's first intercollegiate game ever, Miss Gascoigne<sup>24</sup> led the Hockey team to victory over Lynchburg College. In February of 1921 the Basket-Ball team followed suit, defeating Westhampton in the sport's first intercollegiate competition. "With a team of such individual contortions is

it any wonder that the resulting score was 55-22?<sup>25</sup>

Fourteen years after the establishment of the Association, Sweet Briar athletics had taken the final steps toward a full competitive commitment. According to the 1921 Briar Patch, "intercollegiate athletics built up college spirit and brought about a more broad minded view of athletics in general." "Friendly rivalry" was still a part of intercollegiate competition, but first and foremost, Sweet Briar athletes now played to win.

The girls at Sweet Briar have always, since the very first year of the College, had an intense interest in athletics, which is quite natural when we consider the almost wonderful advantages which we possess to promote our interest in this respect. Our campus stretches as far as the eye can reach in every direction, providing generously suitable spots for every particular sport . . . it would be strange indeed if we were not enthusiastic over the advantages which are in our possession to make athletics one of ~~the~~ chief interests at Sweet Briar.

- Briar Patch, 1910

## NOTES

- 1 Faculty Minutes, 1907, p. 39. Reference to Sweet Briar Athletic Association Constitution, p. 1.
- 2 Briar Patch, 1910, p. 71.
- 3 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume II. April 1911, p. 230.
- 4 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume II. April 1911, p. 230.
- 5 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume I. February 1910, p. 75.
- 6 Chronicle of American Physical Education (1885-1930), p. 441.
- 7 Chronicle of American Physical Education (1885-1930), p. 209.
- 8 Briar Patch, 1910, p. 70.
- 9 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume II. December 1910, p. 65.
- 10 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume I. February 1910, p. 75.
- 11 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume V. November 1913, p. 31.
- 12 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume VI, October 1914, p. 33.
- 13 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume IV. June 1912, p. 168.
- 14 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume VII. February, 1916, p. 97.
- 15 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume VIII. March 1917, p. 210.
- 16 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume VIII. March 1917, p. 210.
- 17 Briar Patch, 1920, p. 138.
- 18 Athletic Association Constitution, p. 4.
- 19 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume X. February 1918, p. 103.
- 20 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume XI. December 1918, p. 56.
- 21 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume XI. December 1918, p. 56.
- 22 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume XI. December 1918, p. 59.
- 23 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume XI. December 1918, p. 56.
- 24 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume XII. December 1920, p. 85.
- 25 Sweet Briar Magazine, Volume XII. March, 1921, p. 136.

### ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY PRIMARY SOURCES

Athletic Association Constitution. Located in Room One of the Archives in the faculty minutes of 1922; middle right hand shelf. A published copy of the Constitution. Useful as it states the purpose, rules and guidelines of Sweet Briar's Athletic Association.

Briar Patch. Located on the bottom shelf of the first cabinet on the left in Room Two of the Archives. 1910 edition contains detailed descriptions of the first Field Day and the first interclass basket-ball championships held at Sweet Briar. 1920 edition gives information on the first inter-collegiate hockey and basket-ball games played by Sweet Briar. Useful as a reference for what athletic activity was held and considered important enough to record during these years.

Faculty Minutes. Located on the middle shelves of Room One in the Archives. Minutes of May 21 and June 3 of 1907 spot the first mention of the Athletic Association. Discusses faculty approval of the modified constitution of the Association and states its purpose. Useful as it establishes the foundation of the Athletic Association.

Sweet Briar Magazine, 1910-1921. Located on the middle shelf of the first cabinet on the left in Room Two of the Archives. In each issue, a section titled "Athletics" can be found. Contains invaluable information dealing with all of the College's athletic activity during this time. As The Sweet Briar News was not published until 1928, this magazine is used as this paper's primary source.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY SECONDARY SOURCES

Bulletin Sweet Briar College, June 1925. Located in Room One of the Archives on the middle shelf in a box of Miss Emilie Watts McVea's things. Contains a McVea speech delivered at Sweet Briar in 1925 entitled "Sweet Briar College: An Interpretation." Useful as the speech includes a few <sup>para-</sup>photo-graphs about Miss McVea's ideas on the role of athletics at Sweet Briar.

Chronicle of American Physical Education (1855-1930), edited by Aileene S. Lockhart and Betty Spears. Borrowed from Jennifer Crispen, Sweet Briar Physical Education Department. A collection of approximately sixty essays dating 1885-1930. Useful in writing this paper were essays entitled "Basket-Ball for Women," "A Crisis in Girls Athletics," and "The Value of Athletics to College Girls."

Sports in Women's Colleges, a series of articles written by Janet Owen. Borrowed from Jennifer Crispen, Sweet Briar Physical Education Department. A collection of articles written on specific women's colleges in 1932 and their athletic programs. Included is an article on Hollins College. Useful as a comparison to Sweet Briar's Athletic Program, as both are small women's colleges in central Virginia.